Title: Sociability in Search of Mediation: Science Fiction and the Human Animal.

Abstract:

One of modernity's cultural shocks that science fiction writing has recorded so vividly is, undoubtedly, the human animal's perceived lack of agency and control over its own future. By projecting humans' species-being against the backdrop of deep time, people like Malthus and Darwin wrote about forces with machine-like inevitabilities, processes that included sequences of human intentions and purposes but nevertheless lacked any clear-cut revelation of those goals as history's procedural outcome. Specifically in late-Victorian culture, this was interpreted by some as a clash between human ethics and natural cruelty (the 'waste' of time), retaining human species-being as a stronghold against an overbearing teleology of ruthlessness. Some science fiction works since have sought to overcome this impasse by reading human intentions within the laws of nature, others invoked the power of science and technology as ways for human beings to seize control over nature, while yet another set of works tried to reformulate the question entirely, seeking to escape the desperate humanist language of being and control to arrive at a new conception of the posthuman. Although they offer different solutions, a substantial portion of science fiction works are fundamentally grappling with the same problem: How, if at all possible, can the human animal save itself from naturalized determinacy? One specific route of speculation extends the question into the domain of politics: How does the human animal, with its tendency to love and care for those in its immediate proximity, manage to care for all human animals; or even more radically, how is the notion of care itself destabilized when creature delineation collapses under the pressure of that care? In this paper, I will discuss three works that present three different approaches to digest this conundrum: Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993). These works do not just contain presentations of different political projects with regards to the issue of (post)human sociability, but they invest in aesthetic programs too, specifically of course, the opportunity of science fiction itself to generate a language of solidarity and cooperation by its ability to allegorically transform their specific stories into 'grand narratives'. We are inclined to read these texts as more than amusing or intriguing pieces of writing that offer self-contained experiences of localized events. Whether warranted or unwarranted, they come to us as vehicles for a far more powerful message, one with stark political ramifications for intraspecific and interspecific relatability.

Jan Vanvelk